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ABSTRACT

Since 1998 a consortium of six educational and community institutions in Australia have created a pathway into tertiary education for those not served by existing paths. The new path results in a Diploma of Further Education. The program is based on a philosophy of lifelong learning, including a foundation of eight lifelong learning goals. Curriculum has been developed to enable learners to work toward these educational goals through a learning experience based on recognizing and encompassing the multiplicity and connectedness of learning. Learners who do not complete all modules for the diploma may attain a Certificate IV of Further Education. The program is aimed at learners who return to adult community and further education (ACFE) but who lack the confidence to move on to study at a higher level through previously existing pathways. The program contains four core modules that students must take; they also must develop a portfolio of their learning experiences. The program also features learning mentors, who advise, guide, and befriend the students. An information packet, a curriculum framework, a learning mentor manual, and guidelines for conducting the program have been developed. Six pilot programs have been implemented. Approximately 17 students have been through the pilot, and all those who wanted to do so have applied to further education institutions or universities. (Contains 10 references.) (KC)

Diploma of Further Education Project:
Pathways to Tertiary Education

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Diploma of Further Education Project: pathways to tertiary education

by Phoebe Palmieri, Project Manager of the Diploma of Further Education Project, RMIT

What is the purpose of the project?

Early in 1998, discussions between the department of Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) and RMIT University suggested that there was a need for a pathway into tertiary education for those not catered for by existing ones. This suggestion was discussed at a forum for ACFE members in September 1998 where it was strongly supported, and followed up with a wider survey which also supported the notion. The idea crystallised as the development of a Diploma of Further Education, providing a supported means for learners to progress from ACFE to tertiary education environments.

Funding to put the plan into practice was obtained from the Office of Training Further Education (OTFE) as one of six 'seamless education' projects, designed to explore ways of easing the transition between the sectors of education.

The concept is currently being developed by a consortium of six members: RMIT University (the lead agency), the University of Ballarat, Holmesglen Institute of TAFE, Central Highlands Wimmera ACFE Region, Northern Metropolitan ACFE Region and Eastern Metropolitan ACFE Region. The project has been under way since May this year, and is now in its closing stages.

We expect the program to be available to any interested provider in 2000.

What is the philosophical foundation of the program?

The philosophy behind the development of the Diploma of Further Education is very much that of empowerment, through the development of the capacity for independent, autonomous and self-directed lifelong learning. In the Report prepared for UNESCO, Delors (1996)¹ states that learning throughout life is based on four pillars:

- learning to know
- learning to do
- learning to live with others
- learning to be.

ACFE has taken these four pillars and expanded them into eight lifelong learning goals which provide a reference point for all curriculum written within the new conceptual framework for Further Education, *"Transforming Lives,*

*Transforming Communities"*². That is, learners will be encouraged to:

- understand complex systems that interact unpredictably
- identify and integrate existing and emerging personal, local, national and global perspectives
- prosper with difference, paradox and multiple sets of realities
- see and make connections between the past and present and the future
- encourage sustainability in relationships and the environment
- engage in a process of change, privately and publicly, civically and
- occupationally, throughout life
- extend learning styles and repertoires
- develop insights through questioning, through asking 'why?' and 'what if?' as well as 'what?' and 'how?'.

(Bradshaw, 1999:23)³

This curriculum has been developed for those seeking to prepare themselves for the challenges of tertiary education. It aims to enable learners to work towards these educational goals through a learning experience based on recognising and encompassing the multiplicity and connectedness of learning, the critical intelligence it requires and the transformation inherent in growing autonomy and independence and in the exercise of thoughtful action.

What is the program like?

The program will carry the credential of Diploma of Further Education. Learners who do not complete all modules for the diploma, may attain the Certificate IV of Further Education which is nested within it.

It is aimed at learners who return to study in ACFE, and who then perhaps lack the confidence to move on to study at a higher level through the existing pathways.

Learners undertake four core modules. These modules are designed to enable learners to organise and monitor their own learning and to develop explicit consciousness of their strengths, weaknesses and preferences as a learner. The modules also enable learners to explore different tertiary options and develop an individual learning path in preparation for entry into the tertiary course of their choice.

The core modules are supported by modules or units of competency from existing TAFE and Higher Education accredited courses. These are selected by the learner in collaboration with a learning mentor and course advisers from targeted tertiary institutes. These modules provide content and skill development in the learner's chosen occupational area to support the more generic learning provided by the core modules.

As part of the Diploma of Further Education, students will develop a portfolio which provides evidence of their learning and competence. As well as having intrinsic value to the student, this portfolio will be useful for negotiating adult entry to the higher education institution of the student's choice.

Students will have a learner mentor who will be able to help them to develop and validate their learning pathway and who will assist them in their movement towards autonomy and confidence as learners.

The selection of modules is undertaken with the support of the learning mentor and once a draft has been agreed on, the learner contacts an authorised person in their university or TAFE institute of choice (a course adviser or similar person). Together they work out what modules will satisfy the institution's requirements while providing an interesting, coherent program for the learner.

If students are ready to enter their chosen program before completing the Diploma of Further Education, they are encouraged to make the transition straight away; but of course those students who wish to do so are encouraged to complete the Diploma.

What does the learning mentor do?

A central element of the Diploma of Further Education is that students develop the confidence to study at tertiary level, and the skills to succeed in tertiary study. ACFE generally provides a very nurturing environment for students; a very different environment exists in TAFE and, particularly, universities, where students are expected to work in a much more independent way. Readiness to move into tertiary learning is not just about having obtained competencies and formal prerequisites, but also about having the independent learning skills and attitudes to navigate the campuses, structures and processes of a tertiary institution.

The role of the learning mentor is to work closely with students, especially in the early parts of the program, as an adviser, guide, sounding board and critical friend. As the students increase their skills and improve their confidence, the learning mentor gradually steps back from the process so that

the learner becomes more and more autonomous.

Since many learners will form part of a small group in their ACFE provider, peer interaction is another valuable means of giving and gaining support and confidence.

What are the tangible outcomes of the project?

A package providing essential information for all those involved in delivering the Diploma of Further Education is in preparation, and should be available early in 2000.

The curriculum has been developed as a framework which details the content and other aspects of the core modules, and provides guidelines for the selection of elective modules. At the time of writing, the curriculum is going through the new ACFE accreditation process, which we hope will be finished before Christmas.

Along with the curriculum goes a Learning Mentor Manual. This document discusses in some detail the role of the learning mentor in the context of this program. It gives comprehensive advice on working with students in the core modules.

The third part of the package of documents is a set of protocols and guidelines which discusses issues of concern to mentors and to providers in ACE, TAFE and higher education. Topics dealt with include (among others) recognition and customisation issues, networks and linkages, fees and charges.

In addition to this package, we will be providing advice to OTFE on the professional development which will be needed by people involved with the Diploma.

The pilot delivery in 1999

While all this preparation has been going on, six hardy ACFE providers have been teaching the core modules in a pilot program. This has been extremely successful, thanks in large measure to the hard work and creativity of the learning mentors and coordinators.

Approximately 17 students have been through the pilot, and all those who wanted to do so have made application to TAFE institutes or universities, through VTAC or special entry processes. Acceptances have been obtained from RMIT, the University of Ballarat, Deakin, Swinburne and the Melbourne College of Natural Medicine; while some students are still awaiting interviews. Some students who are not yet ready to make application will continue in the Diploma of Further Education next year.

Courses into which students have been accepted include natural therapies, business, information technology, welfare/community services, primary art teaching and sound engineering, and one student has been accepted into a double degree program to study information systems and business.

Not all the students decided to proceed to tertiary institutions; two, in the course of studying their Reflective Learning and Planning modules, came to the conclusion that they were not yet ready for tertiary study, and will instead go on to other programs. This too is a pleasing outcome, since these students are more likely to succeed having set themselves realistic goals, rather than attempting study for which they are not ready.

We have had some surprises in the students who enrolled in the pilot. We had expected a high rate of mature women returning to study. While there were some in this category, there were some younger women, and more male students than we had predicted. This last group tended to be young men who had completed or nearly completed secondary school; some of these had lost confidence in their ability as a result of the difficulty experienced in finding jobs. The students came from many backgrounds, including those speaking languages other than English.

Some took to the program quite readily, and speedily understood how to tackle their tasks. Some took much longer to find their feet, but then progressed rapidly. All the students have reported that they have gained greater confidence in their ability to study successfully.

Working closely with other students as well as their learning mentors contributed to this achievement. For example, students were asked to visit a university campus during their program. Some of them went to Open Days, others to visit libraries. They found it much easier to do this in pairs or small groups than they would have done alone.

Even though the pilot delivery included only a small number of students, the results nevertheless indicate that the Diploma of Further Education is suitable for a very wide range of learners.

Three professional development sessions have been held for learning mentors, coordinators and members of the project

team. These were of vital importance in the early stages, since the learning mentors bravely took on the task with a curriculum in its early stages of development and little else in the way of formal guidelines. The sessions were a useful forum for exchanging ideas on what to do during the pilot, and also provided valuable information for the project team in developing the various strands of the project.

What will working in the Diploma of Further Education be like for learners and mentors?

First, working in the Diploma of Further Education will be interesting and enjoyable. Learners will increase their skills and knowledge through the modules they study. In addition to this, they will gain a greater understanding of themselves, particularly of their strengths and weaknesses in studying, and also of the nature of study at a tertiary level and how to go about it successfully. A student who works successfully through the

Diploma of Further Education has a very good chance of studying successfully in TAFE or higher education.

For learning mentors too, the Diploma will be challenging and rewarding. They will not be teaching a set curriculum; they will be journeying together with their students, within certain guidelines. And they will be modelling 'learning to learn' strategies through their interactions with learners. They will need to work closely with their students as they begin their program, and yet encourage them to move on independently as they progress. This is not always an easy transition to make, but we believe it will be both satisfying and professionally enriching, as it has been for those who took part in the pilot.

For further information regarding The Diploma of Further Education, please contact:

Sarah Lane at The Office of Prospective Students, RMIT
Ph: 03 99252260

Student Recruitment Services, University of Ballarat,

Ph: 1800 811 711

Careers Counsellor, Holmesglen Institute of TAFE,

Ph: 03 95641782

i This section prepared by Cathy Down as part of the accreditation submission for the program.

ii Delors, Jacques 1996. *Learning: The Treasure Within*. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, UNESCO Publications, Paris.

iii Bradshaw, Delia 1999. *Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities: A conceptual framework for further education*. (2nd edition) Adult, Community and Further Education Board, Melbourne

iv Ibid.